

6 Enigmatic bush dwarfs of West Africa

The case of the *siyawesi* of northwestern Benin

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One day a hunter went hunting in the bush. Seeing that a storm was moving in, he sought shelter under a tree next to someone's homestead. He did not know that it was the home of *Keyawedike* [singular of *siyawesi*].

The wind picked up and a branch fell from the tree. Hearing the crash, *Keyawedike*'s dog started to bark. *Keyawedike* sent his child to see what was happening. The child returned and told his father that there was a hunter under the tree sheltering from the rain. *Keyawedike* sent the child to bring the hunter in from the wind and rain, was it right that his family had shelter whilst the hunter stayed outside and suffered?

The hunter entered *Keyawedike*'s home and they greeted each other. *Keyawedike*'s wife prepared sorghum porridge for the hunter. The hunter looked at the porridge and exclaimed, 'What's this? I can't eat this! I'm a hunter and live off the blood and meat of the animals I kill.' *Keyawedike* replied, 'Try it and see.' The hunter started to eat and *Keyawedike* asked, 'How do you like it?' The hunter replied, 'It is good!'

(Interview by J. Merz, February 2006)

Introduction¹

Yammu², a village elder, went on to tell how *Keyawedike* gave the hunter gifts of sorghum seed, farming utensils and poultry, together with instructions in cultivation, beer brewing and animal husbandry. The hunter, who was a member of the Benammoutchaabe – one of the twenty-three Bebelibe³ communities – returned home and successfully followed *Keyawedike*'s instructions (see also Huber 1979: 40–48). Benammoutchaabe community members are also known as the *siyawesi yanbe* (*siyawesi* 'owners'). Today, this story of the hunter's encounter with the *siyawesi* bush dwarfs is recounted when explaining how the Bebelibe discovered sorghum, yam, beans and other foods (see also Huber 1973: 386).

With a population of around 69,500 people, the Bebelibe are largely rural and live in loose-knit villages in the mountainous area of the Atacora region, in the northwest of the Republic of Benin. Most of the Bebelibe are located in the Commune of Coby, with additional villages in the neighbouring Commune of Boukoumbé and across the border in Togo. Many rely on subsistence

farming and growing cash crops for their livelihood. All of the Bebelibe with whom I have spoken testify that *Uwienu* is the Supreme Being and creator of all. The first Catholic missionaries arrived in the Commune in the late 1940s, whereas the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the early 1950s (Akibo 1998; Cornevin 1981: 436, 440–441, 453–454). Whilst an estimated 10 per cent of the population now attend a church, Islam remains marginal. The majority of the population continue to be guided by the beliefs and practices of their ancestors and for many people paying homage to *Uwienu* through his intermediaries is an integral part of life. These intermediaries include community/lineage guardian shrine entities, ancestors and the *siyawesi* (see also Huber 1973: 378). Since their initial encounter with the hunter, the *siyawesi* have maintained an alliance with the Bebelibe and regularly choose individuals to become diviners.

In this chapter I present the case of the *siyawesi* bush dwarfs and their ongoing relationship with the Bebelibe. Such human-like beings are known throughout the region and hold positions of varying importance in West African ontology. Bush dwarfs are frequently referred to in ethnographic works dating from the 1920s onwards (e.g. Cardinall 1927; 1931; Rattray 1927; Jackson 1977a; 1977b; Fainzang 1986; Kirby 1986; Maurice 1986; Erny 1988; Ovesen 1990; Tengan 1990; Bonnet 1981–82; 1986; 1994; 1995; Goody 1997; Guigbile 2001; Koabike 2003 and Heraud 2005) often in subsections dealing with ontology, divination, sacrifice, aetiological and procreation beliefs or social structure. To date, the only published literature that mentions the *siyawesi* specifically has been written by Hugo Huber (1973), a Swiss anthropologist who conducted research amongst the Bebelibe in 1966–1967.

Although people across the region usually refer to these entities as bush dwarfs or bush spirits, different authors have employed a wide range of vocabulary when interpreting the given vernacular term, which suggests that there is some uncertainty about how these entities should be viewed and classified. Maurice (1986: 448–450) alone refers to them as *nains* ('dwarfs'), *démons* ('demons') and *esprits* ('spirits'). They have also been labelled as 'fairies' (Bannerman-Richter 1987: 30; Goody 1997: 64 n.69; Rattray 1927: 25), 'pixies' (Cardinall 1931: 77–96) and 'sprites' (Goody 1962: 212). I prefer to call them 'bush dwarfs' as terms such as 'spirit' do not adequately express their embodiment for those who see and relate to them, nor does it convey their lifestyle, which reflects – and is thought to precede – that of their human counterparts, as the opening story demonstrates (see also Goody 1997: 65–66; Kirby 1986: 61–62; Ovesen 1990: 150; Tengan 1990: 6–7). I recognise that the term 'dwarf' also has its limitations, as it runs the risk that they are reduced to mythological beings. Thus, when I write about the specific situation for the Bebelibe, I employ the Mbelime terms *keyawedike* and *siyawesi*.

I consider the case of the *siyawesi* pertinent. Although the many descriptions prevalent in the existing literature indicate an underlying assumption that – for the societies concerned – these entities truly exist, little has been written that addresses the reality of their existence. One exception is

Bannerman-Richter's (1987) autobiographical account about the *nmoetia* of Ghana. Bannerman-Richter recounts his journey from scepticism to accepting that the *nmoetia* exist after personally meeting and interviewing some of them in 1970. Having lived amongst the Bebelibe for over thirteen years, I cannot dismiss the *siyawesi* as imaginary (see also Geschiere 1997: 20–21). I am in the same position as Geschiere (1997: 23) was when he wrote about witchcraft: although I cannot personally verify the *siyawesi*'s presence, I cannot deny the obvious reality of the *siyawesi* for those I have spoken with. I hope to demonstrate that the question of the *siyawesi*'s reality should be taken seriously, whilst also showing that how people engage with them changes depending on different trajectories of modernity (Geschiere et al. 2008: 5).

I start this chapter by describing the *siyawesi*'s appearance and behaviour before moving on to examine their place in Bebelibe ontology and role in divination. With reference to testimonies given by those I interviewed, I subsequently address the question of reality and the impact of post-colonial modernity as represented by the arrival of institutions such as churches, Western-style health care and an education system modelled on the French one. I conclude by proposing that bush dwarfs are not merely mythical beings but that they really exist.

***Siyawesi* appearance and behaviour**

A major factor differentiating *benitibe* ('people') from *tiwante* ('animals') is their ability to communicate directly.⁴ The *siyawesi*, however, are not considered animals. Although they are invisible to most humans, their bodily form resembles that of a human and they speak directly with those they choose to relate to. They know all languages and will speak the language of the person concerned. Those I interviewed indicated that the *siyawesi* are between half and one metre tall and have long, thick hair. Consequently, they are also known as the *tiyuute yanbe* ('hairy ones'). They live in the bush, usually go around in pairs, cultivate red rice and sorghum and rear black-coloured helmeted guineafowl (*Numidameleagris*). They like to play in water and often come out at night when they sow in people's fields and either take or replace grain from people's granaries (see also Huber 1973: 386–387). In more recent years, this behaviour has expanded beyond the granary to include money and other valuable items.

Everybody I talked to shared similar accounts about the nature of the relationship between the *siyawesi* and people. If you are chosen by the *siyawesi* and you maintain a good relationship with them, you will do well and become rich. They will provide you with heightened perception, see that your crops and domestic animals succeed, make sure you never lack for simple provisions and generally take care of you. If you do not maintain the relationship, then you will suffer. The *siyawesi* can hide things from you, chase you and whip you, steal your provisions and give them to those in their favour and see that you fail in your endeavours (for a similar description see Kirby 1986: 61–62, who

writes about the Anufo of Ghana and the *jinn*. Cf. High, this volume). Esther, speaking from personal experience, explained that the '*siyawesi* can give life but can also bring suffering [...] You see, it's like this, what they do is harsh and yet is good [...] if you can provide for them, you will be rich [...]' (Interview, October 2009).

All the interviewees gave similar explanations about what you need to do to keep the *siyawesi* happy: give them the first fruits of your harvest, the firstborn of your domestic animals and any provisions they may ask for. Jackson (1977b: 126), who wrote about sacrifice and the social structure of the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, explained that the Kuranko offer sacrifices to bush spirits in recognition of their allowing the Kuranko to settle and farm the land and that such offerings are given indirectly to God. Those who offer gifts to the *siyawesi* do so with the same understanding. The *siyawesi* particularly appreciate tiger nuts (*Cyperus esculentus*), bambara groundnuts (*Vigna subterranea*), peanuts, sesame seeds and non-fermented sorghum beer (see also Huber 1973: 386–387). After Esther's father died, providing for the *siyawesi* became a challenge. Unable to satisfy their demands, they started to trouble her. In the end she took refuge in a church: 'I asked *Uwienu* (God) and he sent the *siyawesi* away from me, as I don't have someone who can perform sacrifices for me.' (Interview, October 2009).

Interviewees explained that the *siyawesi* usually choose people when they are young. Such people wander off into the bush and cannot be found, sometimes for several days or even weeks at a time. They turn up later well fed and taken care of. They may be troubled with ideas and thoughts, see things that other people miss and know things about others without knowing where the knowledge came from. Robert added that the *siyawesi* befriend the children they choose and that children usually go willingly with the *siyawesi* into the bush. He then spoke about his younger brother who regularly disappeared into the bush with the *siyawesi*. Several of those I interviewed shared that these are signs that a child has been chosen to become a diviner. Robert's brother would have become a diviner had he not died. Kodani explained that everyone chosen by the *siyawesi* could become a diviner, but not everyone will pursue this end. He clarified that most women do not become diviners as the diviner sits in a way that makes it relatively easy for male clients to look up the women's skirts.

The relationship between bush dwarfs and diviners is not unknown in West Africa. Bonnet (1986: 20–21) describes a similar situation for the Mossi of Burkina Faso. The vocation to become a diviner, who is usually a woman, typically starts with '*un épisode psycho-pathologique*' [a psycho-pathological episode] (1986: 21) during which the would-be diviner enters into direct communication with the *kinkirse* ('bush spirits') and disappears into the bush for several weeks. The time spent in the bush is understood as a period of initiation when the *kinkirse* share their knowledge of plants and trees with the would-be diviner. Once the person returns home, her family give food known to be appreciated by the *kinkirse* and the newly appointed diviner begins an apprenticeship under another experienced diviner.

Maurice (1986) provides a detailed ethnography of the Betammaribe, southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe. In a chapter dealing with magic Maurice (1986: 448–450) briefly describes the *dékiaribidé*, whose appearance and behaviour closely resemble the *siyawesi*. He mentions that the *dékiaribidé* seek relationships with seers (*inintînwân* ‘those with eyes’) who then consult the *dékiaribidé* when someone is sick. Whilst Goody (1997: 65–66), writing about the LoDagaa of Ghana, mentions that the *kontome* have human form, can speak, have feelings, converse with humans and that they too act as intermediaries passing on information that has been revealed to them during divination sessions. Finally, when describing Sisala ontology (Ghana), Tengan (1990: 6–7) includes a brief description of *kantomo* ‘spirits of the wild’ who are ‘the ‘first borns’ [sic] of Wiise [Supreme Being] and his messengers to humans’ (1990: 6).

I now examine the *siyawesi*’s role in divination and their place in Bebelibe ontology in more detail.

***Siyawesi*’s role in divination and place in Bebelibe ontology**

Huber notes that there are the two principal groups of intermediaries between the Bebelibe and *Uwienu*: the community/lineage guardian shrine entities and the ancestors. He then mentions the *siyawesi* as a third category and states that; ‘*Une certaine importance, plutôt mythique que rituelle, est également attribuée aux siawissi, petits génies de la brousse.*’ [A certain importance, more mythical than ritual, is attributed to the *siyawesi*, small spirits of the bush.] (1973: 378).

Huber describes what happens should someone encounter the *siyawesi*:

Possédé, il court dans la brousse comme un fou; il commence à crier et on court après lui pour l’attraper; on le conduit chez le devin, qui est le gardien de la médecine des siawissi. La possession par ces génies est, en effet, jugée comme un signe de la vocation de devin.

[Possessed, he runs into the bush like a madman; he starts to shout and others run after him to catch him; he is taken to the diviner, who is the guardian of the *siyawesi* medicine. Possession by these spirits is, in fact, judged as a sign of vocation as a diviner.]

(1973: 387)

Huber then explains that a dwelling place for the *siyawesi* needs to be installed in the home of the person possessed. This is usually in the form of a statue with a hole in its stomach to receive offerings. A diviner then conducts a dedication ceremony that includes pouring libations and animal sacrifices (1973: 387).

Huber (1973: 388) makes further reference to the link between the *siyawesi* and the diviner before going on to describe the importance of the diviner for the Bebelibe with the expression ‘*Les choses du devin sont la vie de l’homme.*’ [The things of the diviner are the life of man.] (1973: 389). The diviner is

consulted in all circumstances: during sickness, infertility, pregnancy and droughts, after accidents, following births, deaths, strange dreams, and so on (1973: 389). Huber then asserts that Bebelibe thought ‘*élève donc la divination clairement au-dessus d’une simple technique ou d’un simple jeu magique*’ [rates therefore divination clearly above simple technique or a simple magical game] (1973: 389) and that “‘*Aller chez Uyenu*’ et “‘*Uyenu a dit*’ sont les synonymes de “*aller chez le devin*” et “*le devin a révélé*”. Cela n’exclut pas la croyance générale selon laquelle le charisme professionnel du devin serait inspiré par les *siawissi*, les génies de la brousse.’ [‘Going to Uwienu (God)’ or ‘Uwienu said’ is synonymous with ‘going to the diviner’ and ‘the diviner revealed.’ This does not exclude the general belief that the professional charisma of the diviner is inspired by the *siyawesi*, the spirits of the bush.] (1973: 430).

The fact that Huber noted that people generally believe that diviners are inspired by the *siyawesi* (1973: 430), whilst also relegating their role as *mythique* (‘mythical’) (1973: 378), suggests that he is sceptical about the *siyawesi*. My research affirms that the *siyawesi* not only inspire the diviners, but that their intermediary role is essential for divination to take place and cannot be dismissed as mythical.

The root of the word *keyawedike* is made up from the verb *ya* (‘to know or see’) and the word *wedi*, which is employed when describing how toddlers walk, thus it literally means ‘the waddling seer’.

Those chosen by the *siyawesi*, whether they pursue a vocation as a diviner or not, are usually members of the Benammoutchaabe community or have a matrilineal family link with the community. In addition, the chosen individuals have the *mtakime* of divination. The *mtakime*, put simply, can be translated as ‘destiny’ (see also Huber 1973: 384; Merz 2014: 93). After a time, a new relationship with the *siyawesi* needs to be formalised. Failure to do so can result in the *siyawesi* disciplining the individuals concerned by whipping and chasing them. Individuals may appear to be mad as they shout out, dance around or run off and hide to avoid being whipped. Once the family formalises the relationship, this apparent madness will disappear and only returns should somebody attempt to sever the relationship and thus incur further discipline from the *siyawesi*. Esther described from her personal experience how this could appear to an onlooker:

The *siyawesi* will be whipping me. You will see me crying but you won’t see why. I will flee and hide under that car [points to vehicle] or in there [points to chicken coop]. If they were to say, ‘take your clothes off and throw them down,’ I would do it. It can drive you crazy. Don’t you see? If you are able to arrange the relationship, it will work well and it is good.

(Interview, October 2009)

Basadi, a diviner, and Kodani both affirmed that the *siyawesi* madness is different from normal mental disorders and will stop as soon as the relationship has been formalised.

When Huber (1973: 387, see above) described similar behaviour resulting from an individual's encounter with the *siyawesi*, he employed the words *possédé* ('possessed') and *possession*. I consider his interpretation misleading, as the *siyawesi* never possess individuals through invasive or 'executive' possession (Cohen 2008). During my interviews, in both Mbelime and French, interviewees used the verbs 'follow', 'choose', 'catch' or 'whip'.

Koabike (2003) who writes about his own people, the Moba of northern Togo, includes a description of the *sanpola* (2003: 44–46). He notes that the *sanpola* are short beings with long hair and human form and that the Moba also refer to them as *niib* ('humans'). Koabike (2003: 44) calls them *démons* ('demons'), as the *sanpola*⁵ are considered malevolent. During a personal conversation (15 July 2011), Koabike explained that the Moba sometimes employ the verb 'to possess' when describing the *sanpola*'s actions in French. He went on to explain that this was for want of a better word. He chuckled at the idea of the *sanpola* actually possessing someone: 'How would they fit into the person's body?' For Koabike the outcome is the same as being invasively possessed, as the *sanpola* dominate the person and force the individual to do their bidding. Cohen (2008) refers to this as 'pathogenic possession'. Although the *siyawesi* are capricious and can be forceful, as Esther's example above demonstrates, they are not generally considered malevolent. This is reserved for *Disenpode*⁶ and the *sihonkpaasi*. I discuss these beings in more detail below.

Those chosen by the *siyawesi* have two small clay statues (male and female) made for them. The installation of the *siyawesi* statues is crucial for the well-being of the individual concerned as it allows for better communication between the individual and the *siyawesi* and for the chosen person to be at peace. Kodani, who is from the Benammoutchaabe community and has a relationship with the *siyawesi*, regularly constructs *siyawesi* statues and performs their installation for people. He describes how he came to construct statues as follows:

The *siyawesi* caught me when I was young. My parents had the *siyawesi* constructed for me. The *siyawesi* then caught my children and I constructed *siyawesi* for them [...] So I said to myself, 'ah, is this your path? You must make and follow the path. If *keyawedike* catches someone, you must go to him and make the *siyawesi*.' That's why I construct *siyawesi* for people. How do I know how to construct *siyawesi*? It is the *siyawesi* who show me and tell me, 'put this here, do that, take this [...]' It is *Uwienu* [God] who sends *keyawedike* and says, 'go to that person and become friends.' If *Uwienu* does not send the *siyawesi*, they don't go.

(Interview, June 2011)

Kodani's account is important as it shows that he does not distinguish the *siyawesi* from their statues – they are both '*siyawesi*'. In order to comprehend the role of the *siyawesi* statues, a general understanding is needed of the

Bebelibe's underlying ontology, which corresponds with what Ingold (2000: 112–113) describes as an animic ontology (see also Merz 2014: 79–135). Bebelibe engagement with the world is intersubjective or relational (see also Bird-David 2006: 44; Hornborg 2006: 29; Kohn 2007: 4). Following Bird-David (2006: 47–48), such a relational view in turn creates a shared community. Bird-David (2006: 47–48) further develops her argument for relationality by pointing out that depicting the other necessarily involves taking an objective perspective, thus the visual representation of animals is often lacking in such societies. The same situation exists for the Bebelibe who normally do not represent other beings by any visual means (see also Merz 2015: 104–105).⁷ The *siyawesi* – who are classed as human – are the exception. This reluctance to represent the other is present among other peoples of the West African savannah as demonstrated by Goody, who notes the same thing for the *kontome* bush dwarfs and LoDagaa of Ghana: 'Virtually alone among the LoDagaa, [the *kontome*] are given human images in sculpted form. Figurative representation, 'breath' and resemblance to mankind are closely intertwined' (1997: 66).

These statues, however, should not be considered representations of the *siyawesi* as the statues are seen as identical with the *siyawesi*. Rather, they help orientate the relationship between the person and the *siyawesi* (see also Merz 2014: 79–135), which is why the statues appear to be crude to outsiders. Following Ingold (2000: 130), such statues are important not for what they depict, but for what they reveal, in this case the existence of a relationship with the *siyawesi*. Ingold continues by stating that the purpose of such depictions is 'to penetrate beneath the surface of things so as to reach deeper levels of knowledge and understanding. It is at these levels that meaning is to be found' (2000: 130). This being the case, it does not matter if the statues get damaged.

For Kodani, the installation of the *siyawesi* equals becoming a diviner. Kodani went on to describe the *siyawesi* installation:

You see, you need [ten things such as] sesame, salt, eel, catfish, bush meat, beef, [local] cheese, tiger nuts, fresh peanuts, bambara groundnuts – that makes ten things. Do you see? You need to have all ten things. Now you need to find a black chicken, a black [helmeted] guineafowl together with a black goat. Oh yes, you need a black dog too. Many things are needed. [Once everything is ready] I come with the *siyawesi*. There is also non-fermented and fermented sorghum beer [...] Once I have arrived the men of the family give me rice flour. [Having mixed some rice flour with non-fermented sorghum beer] I pour libation [on the *siyawesi*]. I then sacrifice the animals and I install the *siyawesi*. I give the person his divining staff and wash his face with blood [from the sacrificed animals] [...]

(Interview, June 2011)

The installation includes drinking *siyawesi* medicine made from special tubers that resemble yam and grow wild in the bush. This medicine, together with

washing the person's face, further heightens the individual's perception. Both Kodani and Basadi told me that once the person receives the diviner's staff, she/he immediately starts to divine.⁸ Basadi added that a person only drinks the *siyawesi* medicine during the *siyawesi*'s installation; it is not something that the person drinks regularly. Once the installation has been completed, the relationship between the person and the *siyawesi* is now formally recognised.

The *siyawesi* are therefore synonymous with divination. Without the *siyawesi*, the diviner knows nothing. Tcheteka explained that the *siyawesi* speak directly to the diviner and that when someone comes for a consulting session, 'the diviner takes his staff and sits and the *siyawesi* come. They tell him to say, "perform this sacrifice; do that; tell him [the one seeking advice] to sacrifice a cow, sacrifice a dog; tell him to prepare sorghum beer". That's how it happens [...]' (Interview, November 2009).

Esther shared how the *siyawesi* would reveal things to her through dreams whilst she slept or through placing special knowledge in her head. She reiterated that it is the *siyawesi* who are really the diviners. The knowledge they place in her head pushes her to act, she cannot ignore it: 'It happens in my ideas, telling me to talk. If I refuse by saying, "I can't", the thoughts will plague me [until I talk]' (Interview, October 2009).

Antoine compared a divination session with our interview. Diviners ask questions on behalf of the client and the *siyawesi* tell them what to say. Antoine explained that a diviner stands up to signal the end of a divination session as the *siyawesi* have left.

All those I spoke to affirmed that *Uwienu* (God) created the *siyawesi*. Several then explained how the *siyawesi* know what to tell the diviner. For Kodani and Basadi, the *siyawesi* are *Uwienu*'s messengers who communicate with the diviner on *Uwienu*'s behalf and thus mediate between *Uwienu* and the Bebelibe:

It's *Uwienu* who gives the *siyawesi* knowledge, which they follow. They come and tell you, 'this is how it is, *Uwienu* said that this is how it is'. If you want to do something, you first call on *Uwienu* don't you? Yes, and it's the *siyawesi* who answer. It's *Uwienu* who has the *siyawesi*; he created them. Yes, the *siyawesi* are *Uwienu*'s messengers. It's *Uwienu* who gave them their knowledge. *Uwienu* created man and he created *keyawedike*.

(Interview with Kodani, June 2011)

The *siyawesi* live in the bush. When the diviner arrives, he takes his staff to call the *siyawesi* [Basadi taps his staff on the ground]. The *siyawesi* arrive and sit there [points to the ground beside him] to interpret for you (the diviner). Then you explain to the person (the client) [...] It's *Uwienu* who gives the message and the *siyawesi* pass the message on to us. It's *Uwienu* who tells the *siyawesi* to do this or that. It's *Uwienu* who created them.

(Interview with Basadi, June 2011)

Esther, who has taken Jesus in place of the *siyawesi*, still believes that they are *Uwienu*'s messengers: '*Uwienu* brought the *siyawesi* forth and it is *Uwienu* who tells them what to say. *Uwienu* brought them forth and they are *siyawesi*. It is *Uwienu* who brought the diviner forth. People say that if you have *siyawesi*, you are a diviner' (Interview, October 2009).

Antoine, who used to attend the Catholic Church, has a different perspective. He believes that the *siyawesi* follow commands issued by *Disenpode*, who is now commonly equated with the devil (see below). He explained that it is *Disenpode* who sends sickness. When a child becomes ill, the father goes to consult a diviner to find out why his child is sick and what he should do about it. Meanwhile, *Disenpode* sends the *siyawesi* to tell the diviner what needs to be sacrificed for the child to get better. For Antoine this is all a ploy to get food for *Disenpode* who is fed by the sacrifices: 'Your child is sick, you take a cow, you take a goat, you take a chicken to perform sacrifices and it's *Disenpode* who eats' (Interview, November 2009).

Tcheteka, a Protestant church elder, believes that the *siyawesi* are *Disenpode*'s children. He explained that *Disenpode* listens in to *Uwienu*'s conversations. *Disenpode* then uses this knowledge to his advantage, passing it along to the *siyawesi* who then share this knowledge with the diviner: 'when *Uwienu* talks, *Disenpode* listens. He knows the good that *Uwienu* wants to do. Don't you see? *Siyawesi* are *Disenpode*'s children and he sends them everywhere' (Interview, November 2009).

As Tcheteka and Antoine talked about *Disenpode* and the *siyawesi*, it was evident that the teaching they have received in church has influenced their ontology and how they now perceive these entities. They explained how *Uwienu* first created *Disenpode* and the *siyawesi*. They then disobeyed *Uwienu* who sent them away to live in the bush. Following the estrangement in their relationship, *Uwienu* created humans. *Disenpode* became jealous of *Uwienu*'s new rapport with humans and set out to destroy this bond. Tcheteka went on to retell the Genesis account of how *Disenpode* tricked Adam into sinning.

Disenpode and sihonkpaasi

In order to better understand some of the changes in how the *siyawesi* are perceived, I now briefly examine two other enigmatic beings: *Disenpode*, who also inhabits the bush, and the *sihonkpaasi* who are associated with rivers and the sky. Changing beliefs about these entities have, in turn, impacted people's opinion of the *siyawesi*. Whilst *Disenpode* is growing in importance, knowledge about the *sihonkpaasi* is diminishing.

Descriptions are a lot more ambiguous for *Disenpode* compared to the *siyawesi*. Nenboni, a village chief, described *Disenpode* as follows:

Disenpode lives in the bush. He doesn't go into people's houses as the *siyawesi* do. He has thick hair and a long neck and if he sees a human, he flees. Those who are strong if they see *Disenpode* they will hunt him down

and take some of his hair. This is why some people have hair like the whites. That's *Disenpode*. *Keyawedike* though is human.

(Interview by J. Merz, July 1997)

Whilst Yammu depicts *Disenpode* as

an evil being who lives in the bush. If he touches or catches someone, the person dies. *Keyawedike* and *Disenpode* are not the same. *Disenpode* comes from the bush. *Uwienu* created him and he lives in the bush. If *Uwienu* allowed him to enter people's homes, it would be the end. *Uwienu* chased him from human habitation into the bush because he is evil. *Disenpode* is nasty.

(Interview by J. Merz, February 2006)

Esther mentioned *Disenpode* in passing as a malevolent bush being who does not enter people's houses, whilst Kodani explained that *Disenpode* is bad whereas the *siyawesi* are good. Huber (1973) made no mention of *Disenpode*, which suggests that his role in Bebelibe ontology was insignificant during the 1960s. Today, *Disenpode*'s place in Bebelibe ontology has been enhanced since the first missionaries chose the term *Disenpode* for the devil, although descriptions about him remain somewhat fuzzy. Everyone agrees, however, that *Disenpode* is evil. J. Merz (2008: 208) explains that most Bebelibe have accepted *Disenpode* as the devil regardless of their faith, which has further obscured pre-colonial beliefs about him. As it seems that *Disenpode*'s pre-Christian role in Bebelibe ontology was not well established, this may have facilitated his adoption as the devil.

Sihonkpaasi literally means 'river beings who paralyse'. They are also known as the *ihini yanbe* ('sky owners'). Several people affirmed that they are short and human-like in appearance but, unlike the *siyawesi*, only have two limbs (an arm and a leg) and short hair. They like to play in water but primarily live in the sky. They can fly and are extremely rapid. Their name is a compound noun that is not originally Mbelime. Indications are that these entities originate from the Berba, northern neighbours of the Bebelibe, and that they have since gained a foothold in Bebelibe territory.

The *sihonkpaasi* are malevolent beings and do not befriend people. They are best known for attacking children and leaving them partially paralysed or mentally retarded, assuming they do not die. Their attacks are quick and severe. The children collapse, their eyes roll to the back of their heads and their limbs become stiff. It seems that to date no medical explanation has been found and those taken to the hospital usually die.

During several of my interviews, people mentioned that the *siyawesi* sometimes turn nasty and attack people with paralysis. Robert explained that many people now confuse the actions of the two beings, attributing the evil acts of the *sihonkpaasi* to the *siyawesi*. Consequently, knowledge about the *sihonkpaasi* is slowly diminishing, whilst some people now perceive the

siyawesi more negatively than before. Several people blamed this confusion on new ideas that have been introduced by schools and churches. To understand what may be behind these changes in how the *siyawesi* are perceived, I now discuss the question of reality and the impact of post-colonial modernity.

Reality and modernity

Most people have a tale to tell either of their personal experience of the *siyawesi* or having witnessed someone else's encounter. The reality of the *siyawesi* cannot be denied for those Bebelibe who have shared their experiences with me either informally or formally these past thirteen years. Cardinall wrote that: '[t]hroughout Togoland, as in Ashanti and the Northern Territories [of Ghana], there is a confirmed belief in the existence of mischief-loving dwarfs. The Ashanti call them *mmotia* and in the north they are known as *kulparga* or *chichiriga*' (1931: 77).

Rattray (1927: 22–26) also has a brief description of the *mmoatia* and noted that peoples' beliefs and descriptions of the *mmoatia* are so credible that 'perfectly stolid, matter-of-fact Englishmen' (1927: 25) have been convinced of their existence. The general conviction about the reality of such entities seems to have remained steadfast despite the fact that today's West African societies have changed significantly since Rattray's time.

The Bebelibe distinguish two eras: *ubɔɔyɔ* ('old times') and *upaanu* ('new times'). The latter term is employed in a variety of senses including all that is new: things, ideas, institutions and new ways of doing things. *Upaanu* is often translated into French as *la modernité* – which can be equated with post-colonial modernity – and is used to demarcate the arrival of European colonialists and the ongoing changes that are associated with them. Institution-wise, in the Commune of Coby the first mission station and school was established in 1947; the first health centre in 1951; the first state primary school in 1959, the state secondary school in 1985 and the 6th form in 2009.

Piot, writing about the Kabre of northern Togo, suggests that the savannah region in general 'has long been globalized and is better conceptualized as existing within modernity' (1999: 1). He realises that this may seem contrary to appearances with the Kabre's apparent 'earmarks of a still pristine African culture'. He goes on to suggest that Kabre's 'apparently traditional features [...] owe their meaning and shape' as much to their 'encounters with Europe' as to their local origins (1999: 1). The Kabre's interactions with others and appropriation of ideas from elsewhere are deliberate and the society cannot be considered bounded or internally focused, nor is it possible to separate 'tradition' from 'modernity' (1999: 16–24, 173–174; see also Geschiere 1997: 8). Piot notes that the Kabre 'welcome and appropriate many things Western – tin roofs for their houses, Western clothes and medicine, radios and cars, a moneyed economy, certain forms of Christianity [...]' (1999: 23).

Piot's observations are equally valid for the Bebelibe. Despite local tendencies to dichotomise between those who are 'traditional' and those who are

'modern' – itself a product of modernity (Geschiere et al. 2008: 3) – all Bebelibe live and participate in *upaanu* ('new times'). How different individuals choose to interact with *upaanu* varies depending on their personal experiences and what they choose to appropriate. Following Geschiere et al. (2008: 5) different trajectories of modernity are apparent within any given society. Taking the testimonies of Kodani, Basadi, Esther, Tcheteka and Antoine, three main trajectories are apparent:

Kodani and Basadi both have personal relationships with the *siyawesi* and do not attend church. For them the *siyawesi* are *Uwienu's* (God's) messengers; Esther, a Christian, also has a personal relationship with the *siyawesi*. Since her conversion, her interaction with them is minimal. Despite some of their seemingly capricious behaviour towards her, she has not demonised them. She has experienced their favour as well as their disfavour. They remain *Uwienu's* messengers but have been superseded by Jesus; Tcheteka and Antoine have not had personal encounters with the *siyawesi* but have attended church. They do not think the *siyawesi* are *Uwienu's* messengers but associate them with *Disenpode* ('the devil'). Despite, this Tcheteka and Antoine remained ambivalent about the *siyawesi*. Geschiere points out that such ambivalence is why 'discourses on the occult incorporate modern changes so easily' (1997: 13). None of the five have been to school. Their differing perceptions of the *siyawesi* appear to be largely affected by their relationship – or lack of – with these entities and whether they have attended church. Their differing experiences have thus modified how they perceive the *siyawesi* but they do not deny the *siyawesi's* existence. Pels, writing about magic and modernity, observes that 'even if magic is denounced as "bad" tradition and backward, it is often, in the process, reconstructed in novel ways that may come to influence social practices at a later stage' (2003: 30). The same can be said of the *siyawesi*.

Many people are attracted to Christianity, as it allows them to move along a trajectory that offers an immediate association with post-colonial modernity, which often results in a transition towards individualism, promotion of the nuclear family, increase in ownership rights and commerce (Bayart 2008 [1998]: 92–93; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 200–201; Erny 2001: 19; Horton 1971: 86; Manning 1998: 101; Merz 2008: 209; Meyer 1998; 1999). This is evident amongst Bebelibe Christians, who are often the most economically active and reject many of the local customs. There are many, however, who have attended church, become disillusioned by it and have left again. This disillusionment seems to be with the institutional nature of the church rather than with Christian teaching. Thus, they have happily appropriated ideas from the teaching they received, as the example of *Disenpode* illustrates, especially if the ideas help them to better understand the world around them.

Other institutions associated with *upaanu* ('new times') include Western-style health care and an education system modelled on the French one. People readily accept information about viruses, bacteria and parasites as disease agents, for example, but this scientific knowledge does not address *why* an

individual became sick in the first place. Only *Uwienu* knows this. After visiting the health centre, especially if the person does not recover as expected, those who have converted to Christianity intercede for the sick person through prayer, whilst others consult *Uwienu* via the diviner, who in turn consults the *siyawesi* to discover the cause of sickness. Some do both.

Jean, an undergraduate student, studied philosophy and biology as part of his *baccalauréat* (equivalent of 'A' levels). Consequently, he started to question his underlying animic ontology. His attitude to animals indicates a shift from viewing them as beings of equal worth to considering them as inferior to humans. His conviction that the *siyawesi* exist, however, stays solid. Although he has not personally encountered the *siyawesi*, he and several friends shared a homestead with someone who has, and he witnessed this person's encounters with them. He concluded that just because science cannot prove that the *siyawesi* exist, does not mean that they do not.

Bonnet (1995: 502) suggests that scientific theories do not necessarily invalidate people's beliefs. This, in turn, explains why many Africans who work in the medical profession can appear contradictory when explaining the cause of a sickness, as they alternate between their local and scientific knowledge. The example of Bannerman-Richter (1987), however, suggests that with time and prolonged exposure, such convictions can be quashed. Bannerman-Richter, who moved from Ghana to the USA as a young man, explained why his childhood beliefs in *mmoetia* turned to scepticism:

My doubts were probably created by my constant exposure to Western ideas and values, and by my mission school education. Serious Western literature does not condone a belief in the supernatural; the Church of England (Episcopal Church), to which I belonged frowned on such beliefs and regarded them as superstitions and heathenisms [...]

(1987: 55)

Bannerman-Richter adds that he initially assumed that beliefs in the *mmoetia* were limited to 'mere ignoramus[es]' (1987: 71). His return to Ghana and personal encounters with the *mmoetia*, however, reversed his scepticism. Gilbert (1998: 81) notes that beliefs in the *mmoetia* are associated with the rural, uneducated poor. This Western scepticism and dismissal of bush dwarfs as being the machinations of the rural and uneducated poor, however, is not tenable amongst the Bebelibe, as demonstrated by Jean above and André, a retired pastor, who told me that he had been 'taken' by the *siyawesi* when he was young; they took him into the bush where they fed him. Now he is a Christian, he does not actually see them anymore but he knows they are present. André reiterated throughout our interview that the *siyawesi* are real. At one point he insisted, 'they exist, they exist. You can't just do away with (*supprimer*) them. They will always be there' (Interview, June 2011). A key difference between Bannerman-Richter's and André's experience lies in how the church itself views such beings. Bannerman-Richter attended a church in the USA where

his beliefs were not taken seriously, whilst the local churches in Cobly do not deny that the *siyawesi* exist, but rather demonise them.

Hill, writing about witchcraft beliefs in Africa, makes the following observation:

One limitation to the majority of the research [...] is that the scientists do not believe in the reality of the spiritual or psychic world. Discounting the supernatural, all is reduced to sociological or psychological causes. Their theories contain truth, but they are partial explanations.

(1996: 325)

She suggests that one reason Westerners struggle with such beliefs is due to their lack of knowledge and not because witchcraft does not exist (cf. Bernard, this volume). She realised that her ignorance contributed to seemingly illogical data: 'Inconsistent responses lead me to doubt the logic of my questions rather than the logic of the African worldview' (1996: 334).

Van Dijk and Pels note that: 'the extent to which one privileges a "natural" over a "supernatural", or a "scientific" over a "religious" conception of the world is the outcome of a struggle over how to perceive, rather than the reflection of a given "objectivity"' (1996: 249). They then go on to discuss Western perception, based on what the eye sees of reality, versus "'inner" vision or "inspiration"'. They 'feel that a study of the politics of perception in the practice of studying religion in Africa can restore initiative and agency' to those under study (1996: 250; see also Pels 1998: 205). Such an approach resonates with much of the literature on the more recent ontological turn in anthropology (e.g. Henare et al. 2007; Scott 2013; Kohn 2015). I have attempted to do this by allowing several Bebelibe to speak for themselves in this chapter. Yammu explained to me that we do not really see with our eyes, but rather with our *kebodike* ('vital force'): 'it's *kebodike* that sees, it's *kebodike* that sees. The eye sees nothing; it's *kebodike*' (Interview, February 2012).

Thus, it is crucial that one examines people's convictions, such as those surrounding bush dwarfs, in the light of the society's own discourse and practices, rather than one embedded in Western epistemology, as J. Merz (2004: 574) suggests with regard to witchcraft beliefs. He (2004: 573) points out that colonial administrators and missionaries expected beliefs about witchcraft to disappear as a result of modernisation, as they thought had happened in Europe following the Enlightenment. This has proved not to be the case – neither in Africa nor in Europe (see also Geschiere 1997). J. Merz observes that: 'The question of the "reality" of witchcraft and other beliefs is already an old dilemma in anthropology because beliefs, by their very nature, escape the scientific scrutiny of the Enlightenment paradigm as they are intrinsically empirically unverifiable and unfalsifiable' (2004: 574).

The dilemma continues. Despite advances in science and technology, and new knowledge that is promoted through Western-style health care and French-inspired schooling, experiential certainty of the *siyawesi* persists.

Meanwhile, other influences, such as Christianity, help to maintain this certainty whilst also modifying it. Consequently, *Disenpode* has gained in importance in Bebelibe ontology through his transformation into the devil, whilst the *siyawesi* are in the process of becoming demonised by some and have taken on certain characteristics of the *sihonkpaasi*. This becomes especially evident if one asks a person who has attended church to translate the word *siyawesi* into French. The common response is *les démons* ('demons'). Others, however, translate *siyawesi* as *les nains* ('dwarfs') or *les esprits/génies de brousse* ('bush spirits').

Conclusion

There was a diviner, a marabout (Muslim scholar) and an imam. *Uwienu* wanted to test their divination abilities, so *Uwienu* constructed a mud hut and put a cow inside. *Uwienu* then asked the *marabout* to tell him what was in the room and how it looked. The *marabout* said that there was an animal inside but he neither knew what it was nor its colour. *Uwienu* then asked the imam, who also said that there was an animal inside but he couldn't say more than that. *Uwienu* then asked the diviner who, with the help of the *siyawesi*, confirmed that there was an animal inside, that it was a cow and that it had various markings of this and that colour. *Uwienu* was impressed with the diviner and affirmed him as better than the marabout and imam. His success was due to the *siyawesi*.

(Recounted by Basadi, June 2011)

This chapter has presented a case study of the *siyawesi*, the name employed for bush dwarfs by the Bebelibe of northwestern Benin, demonstrating that the *siyawesi* are important to Bebelibe ontology due to their role in divination as *Uwienu*'s (God's) messengers. Local church teaching, however, influences how people understand the *siyawesi*, with the result that some people now associate them with *Disenpode*, who in turn has taken on the role of the devil.

When Huber employed the word *mythique* ('mythical') (1973: 378) to characterise the *siyawesi*, it is not evident what sense he accorded the word. It could be interpreted in a number of ways: something idealised, fictitious, derived from a myth, imaginary or legendary. Regardless of what he meant by this, it is clear from what the interviewees shared with me that all these interpretations are problematic. Everybody I spoke with affirmed that the *siyawesi* exist and that they seek to have reciprocal relationships with certain people. Those chosen by the *siyawesi* often become diviners and are instructed by the *siyawesi*. Thus, the *siyawesi*'s intermediary role is not mythical but very real.

I agree with J. Merz (2004; see also Merz 2014: 216–225) and other contemporary scholars who write about witchcraft and sorcery (e.g. Nyamnjoh 2001; Stoller and Olkes 1987: 229; see also Bernard, this volume), in addition to the large body of literature emerging from the ontological turn (e.g. Henare et al. 2007; Scott 2013; Kohn 2015), that together with representing the views of a given people group, we should also 'accept the African discourse [...] as valid and affirm that, yes, witchcraft *does* exist' (Merz 2004: 576, italics in the

original). In the same way, I propose that bush dwarfs *do* exist even though they elude the ‘scientific verification’ typically required if cryptids are to be taken seriously by external commentators.

Notes

- 1 The results detailed in this chapter are based on personal observation and in-depth interviews conducted either by Johannes Merz or myself. Interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions. All interviews were conducted in French and Mbelime and were recorded. The interviews were fully transcribed and the Mbelime was translated into French. All English translations are mine. My thanks to Bienvenue Sambiéni and Claire N’Tade for their help with transcribing and back translating the Mbelime texts. I would also like to thank Johannes Merz for his support as I wrote this chapter and Samantha Hurn for encouraging me to pursue my research into the *siyawesi*.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms.
- 3 The Bebelibe and their language, Mbelime (which is Gur), are also known by the names Niendé (e.g. Maurice 1986: 4) or Nyende (e.g. Huber 1973).
- 4 If a person wants to speak with an animal, or vice versa, either the person or the animal needs to shape-shift.
- 5 The word *sanpola* means ‘the cursed ones’ in Moba (Koabike, personal communication, 16 July 2011).
- 6 *Disenpode*’s character is very close to that of the Moba’s *sanpola*. Moba and Mbelime are both Gur languages. *Sanpola* and *Disenpode* have the same root: *sanpo-* and *-senpo-*.
- 7 Children now draw pictures of animals at school. Consequently, there is currently some artwork with animals, such as a mural at the cultural centre in the town of Coby. Photographs, especially of people, have also become important (see also Merz 2014: 202–207).
- 8 The same procedure is carried out for both men and women, although women rarely practise formal divination following their initial installation, as mentioned above.

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